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Crop debugger

Theophilus E. Mlaki

Theophilus E. Mlaki describes how CABI's Crop Protection Compendium on CD-ROM has helped farmers in Tanzania to eliminate a devastating cassava pest.

The ICT services support team of the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) makes regular visits to the telecentres it operates in many rural areas. During a recent visit to the telecentre in Lugoba, a village 125 km west of Dar es Salaam, a team member noticed that the cassava fields were more extensive and rather healthier than they had been just five months earlier. He wondered why.

According to the villagers cassava had always been a major staple and cash crop in Lugoba, but over the past decade there had been a steady decline in yields. They had noticed a whitish substance on the underside of the leaves, which then spread, causing extensive damage to the leaves and shoot tips, until the plants shrivelled and died.

Another team member who had visited the village before recalled that he had seen a group of farmers and an extension officer gathered around a computer in the telecentre. They were staring at a picture of an unhealthy-looking cassava plant, with the same substance on the leaves. The farmers were impressed by what they saw – in fact an infestation of the cassava mealybug, *Phenacoccus manihoti* – and agreed that it was similar to the situation in their own fields.



The farmers were studying the Crop Protection Compendium (CPC), an encyclopedic multimedia tool that contains key information on major crop pests, their impact and possible remedies. Published by CAB International on CD-ROM and on the Internet, and updated annually, the CPC includes data and images of 200 crops grown in 150 countries, with worldwide distribution maps.

After using the CPC, the villagers realized that their problem was not uncommon, and that the mealybug had devastated cassava fields throughout Africa. They also learned that a natural predator had been found – a parasitic wasp originally from Paraguay. The wasp has been introduced in many parts of Africa and has been remarkably successful in controlling the cassava pest. The villagers were convinced, and asked the extension officer to help them obtain the wasps. This decision marked the beginning of the end for the mealybug, and led to the revival of cassava growing and the restoration of food security for the village.

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For more information about the CPC, visit the [CABI website](#)

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